Division II Project Development Approach
Chapter II-2 Defining and Creating a Sense of Place

II-2-1 Introduction

Many communities are currently engaged in defining a "sense of place" within their community. A "sense of place" is closely related to how people perceive their environment. It involves the actual safety and comfort of the area, the general appeal, and the feelings of connection between the people and the place. The efforts of these communities focus on implementing efficient transportation facilities to fulfill their desires and needs; maintaining and enhancing a healthy local economy; and developing the downtown with sensitivity to the environment and the users. Their efforts attempt to embody the values and goals defined by the community. A variety of considerations influence the community's efforts to develop this quality, including the design of the road and roadside and the characteristics of buildings and public spaces. This chapter describes the main considerations a community might weigh when developing their downtown area, and can be useful in guiding highway designers when entering into a downtown revitalization or enhancement project.

II-2-2 Design Purpose and Need

As designers of urban transportation systems, it is critically important to understand the role that a transportation facility serves within a community and corridor in the local, regional, and statewide context. Considering the facility within its specific context can assist with the identification of design attributes that are important to the larger local and regional community. It is important that the transportation project development process includes a wide variety of interest groups and incorporates community-based decision-making to ensure that the facility will meet the needs of both the community and the corridor. Understanding a community's desires and needs helps the design team contribute to the community's economic success, and can aid in establishing a collaborative, interdisciplinary approach that involves local interests and citizens.

Often the state route serves multiple purposes. When a highway is located within a city it can be the city's "Main Street". At the same time it is a route that is intended to support regional mobility, freight needs, and transit. Taking the time to understand who uses, crosses, and depends on the facility will help ensure the appropriate design elements are balanced and incorporated into the project.

On state highway facilities that serve as the main street through towns and cities, the issues involved in creating a desired downtown environment must be balanced with the safety, speed, and capacity requirements that exist on the highway. With this consideration in mind, some features desired in projects that involve main street and community development might not be feasible. The required speed and capacity of the facility dictate what design attributes may be included, and the allowable placement of others. In the project development process it may be beneficial to address the possibility of developing the primary community-centered area along a city street that is parallel or perpendicular to the state highway. In this way the desires of

the community members and the needs of the route may be addressed with limited conflict

The design features discussed in this chapter are intended for general consideration, and require an impact analysis prior to inclusion in the Route Development Plan.

II-2-3 Determining and Considering the Needs of All Users and Stakeholders

A community considers a number of factors when developing their downtown area. These considerations have been categorized into the following distinct headings: 1) human scale, 2) transportation services, 3) environment, and 4) permanence. The following sections describe some of the factors involved with each.

II-2-3-1 Human Scale

In many downtown environments, the focus is generally on multi-modal transportation and, in particular, on pedestrian accessibility and use. To support this objective, the features within the downtown region are often scaled in a manner that will relate to the road and to those who will see and use them most frequently.

Perspective of Features

This consideration usually entails the development of features that are visually oriented to pedestrians and motorists traveling at slower speeds. This can be accomplished in a number of ways:

Consider views to and from the roadway – The views involved with the roadway structure play an important role in developing and communicating the atmosphere of the downtown region. What people see as they pass through, influences whether they will decide to return. The appearance of the road from the pedestrian point of view also influences how pedestrians feel about the downtown environment.

Figure II-2.1 – Views To and From the Roadway

(Source: Pacific Avenue, Tacoma, WA)

Though the environment is often designed to encourage motorists to slow their speeds through downtown, the designs must still serve to appropriately inform the drivers of the upcoming conditions and options; not distract the drivers' attention; and preserve and enhance the safety of all travelers.

Use pedestrian scale street features – Incorporating street furniture, bike-racks, and other features into a downtown area can create a more comfortable, inviting atmosphere that attracts pedestrians.

Limit main street parking lots – In the visual sense, main street parking lots are typically unattractive. Allowing them along the main street creates a discontinuity in the environment. Parking lots can be encouraged on the side streets, where their visual impacts will not be as significant.

Create Spatial Definition

Spatial definition is the use of three-dimensional space to create the desired environment. The management of spatial definition can play a major role in creating an inviting and comfortable atmosphere within a downtown area.

Orient buildings to face the road – Locating the front entrance of downtown buildings to the street enhances the pedestrian accessibility and activity along the street, while promoting a "downtown " feeling by providing window-shopping opportunities.

Consider the " height-to-width ratio" [1] – The ratio between the heights of the buildings or other street frontages to the width of the traveled way affects the downtown environment. Limiting this ratio to 1 to 5, and more ideally to between 1:2 to 1:3 helps create a human scale environment and can encourage greater use of the area.

In many areas this might not be an achievable element due to the required capacity of the highway or the locations of existing buildings. In such cases alternatives including protected median plantings and periodic wider pedestrian refuges can be evaluated for their impacts on the safety and flow of the vehicular and pedestrian traffic.

Maintain Safety While Developing Aesthetics

The development of aesthetic treatments is often an important component in a community-development project. It is important to maintain an appropriate balance between the desire for aesthetic treatments and the safety needs of a roadway.

Fixed objects within the Design Clear Zone – The placement of trees or other fixed objects along a street introduces unmediated hazards into the roadside environment. These features pose a risk not only to the vehicular traveler, but also to the pedestrians as they increase their perceived sense of safety while they may decrease the pedestrians' visibility to vehicular traffic. The risk associated with roadside trees and other fixed objects can be reduced by placing the features farther from the roadway. Another option includes using low profile barriers in preventing vehicle-tree collisions.

[1] "Creating Livable Streets" p. 45 and "Main Street…When a Highway Runs Through It" p. 17

Figure II-2.2 – Street Tree Struck by Vehicle

(Source: Fones Road, Lacey, WA)

II-2-3-2 Multi-Modal Transportation Services

The road and roadside play an important role in how the downtown feels and functions. Supporting multiple modes of transportation can decrease traffic congestion, thus improving air quality; encouraging pedestrian activity; and making more efficient use of the roadway capacity. Below are some of the considerations and additional benefits involved with developing multi-modal transportation facilities.

Ensure Street Design Supports Adjacent Land Use

It is vitally important that the design of the road supports the existing and projected needs of the community, based on the adjacent land uses. Design the roadway within the right of way to meet the functional needs and achieve the required level of service.

Support multi-modal travel throughout the downtown area – By having multiple modes of travel throughout the downtown area, the accessibility of downtown features can be increased.

Establishing multiple modes of transportation that are interconnected throughout the region can raise sensitive issues. For example, optimizing the usefulness of mass transit includes frequent bus stops, but this situation can cause delays, increased emissions, and frustration for the vehicle-driving population. Trade-off discussions must weigh between the options and conflicting needs to reach a solution optimizing the use of the downtown area.

Figure II-2.3 – Facility for Multiple Modes of Transportation

(Source: Pacific Avenue, Tacoma, WA)

Provide travel mode choice – Incorporating frequent mode interchanges throughout downtown allows people to decide how to travel to and through the area. They are not limited by the constraints of having to make their entire trip by one method of transportation. This might encourage people to use alternatives to private vehicles more frequently.

Conversely, more frequent interchange points between travel modes results in more frequent opportunities for physical conflicts between the roadway users. The issues of safety are to be carefully considered when seeking to develop accessibility.

Minimize travel mode interference – Several modes of transportation use the same facilities, so conflicting needs have to be balanced. Work to ease the transitions between travel modes while establishing modal connectivity and serving all the users.

Consider needs and comfort of all travelers – Urban roads must serve a wide variety of users and one of the goals is to make traveling in the downtown area a comfortable experience for all users.

Consider Truck Usage

Trucks provide most of the delivery services to businesses in the downtown area. Ensuring that this crucial link between the movement of goods and the community is not significantly hindered is essential in developing the downtown economy.

Define and meet delivery vehicle access needs – Trucks have wider turning radii and off-tracking than passenger vehicles. The roadway must be designed to accommodate this turning movement, if the roadway is intended to support any significant truck traffic. This design requirement will limit the use of some roadway features such as bulb-outs.

Figure II-2.4 – Delivery Vehicle Access

(Source: Pacific Avenue, Tacoma, WA)

Consider possibility of developing alternate truck routes – When parallel side streets exist, alternate routes can be developed. Delivery trucks, for example, can then be directed to the side streets, for alley deliveries. These routes can be used to decrease through truck traffic.

II-2-3-3 Built Environment

The environment encompasses a wide variety of considerations, including but not limited to the built, social, economic, natural, cultural and human factors. Developing a sense of place within a community involves balancing proposed projects, growth, and development with the preservation and enhancement of environmental resources. The following bullets outline aspects to be considered in achieving this balance.

Encourage Community Involvement and Activities

A thriving downtown environment hosts a wide variety of activities. Listed below are some techniques used to develop or enhance the downtown infrastructure to encourage and support the activities valued by the members of the community.

Incorporate public involvement in projects – Proposed projects can ensure consistency with a community's vision by including meaningful, frequent opportunities for public involvement and input in the project development stage. Incorporating public comment into the project can ensure the project is true to a community's goals and help foster a sense of investment in and support for the project.

Create public spaces – The creation of public places affords the public the opportunity to gather in the downtown area. Public places create a number of benefits in the form of bringing pedestrians into an area; fostering a sense

of interest and enthusiasm for an area; and creating opportunities for public social contact between community members.

Provide for accessible transit stations and stops, and sidewalks – By ensuring that the transit and pedestrian facilities are inviting and accessible, the public can feel safe and confident about using these methods of transportation. Ensuring that the pedestrian facilities are appropriately visible is also vitally important in establishing the safety of the users.

The use of trees in and near public facilities have both positive and negative impacts. The visibility of all users of the area is directly affected by the placement of trees and their tendency to block views.

Figure II-2.5 – Transit Station Near Shopping Center

(Source: Lakewood Towne Center Boulevard, Lakewood, WA)

Create a Qualitative Sense of Safety

A sense of personal safety is a principal concern when designing effective transportation facilities. There are many factors that influence the actual and perceived safety of an area, and a few of these considerations are discussed below.

Buffer pedestrians from vehicular traffic – Including features that buffer the pedestrians from the vehicular traffic can increase pedestrians' feeling of safety. The features frequently used for this purpose are most often fixed objects including trees, and need to be evaluated for their hazard potential when they are located within the Design Clear Zone. Anecdotal discussion exists as to trees providing a buffer for pedestrians; however, no quantitative evidence exists which supports this point. The same feeling of safety might be provided with shrubs and amenities placed further from the traveled way.

Figure II-2.6 – Pedestrian Facility Buffered from Vehicular Travel

(Source: Littlerock Road, Tumwater, WA))

Ensure public spaces are visually accessible – By ensuring that the public spaces are visually accessible to the passing public, people can become familiar with the environment and feel comfortable using the space. The openness might also discourage loitering and vandalism, which detracts from the sense of safety in an area.

Figure II-2.7 – Visibility into Public Space

(Source: Kent, WA)

Include adequate lighting in downtown area and public spaces – Adequate lighting extends the time in which the areas can be comfortably enjoyed and it might discourage loitering and criminal activity. Lighting also increases the nighttime visibility and can make pedestrians more distinguishable on the roadside.

Give consideration to the placement of the lighting fixtures to avoid unnecessary fixed objects within the Design Clear Zone; introducing light trespass; or disturbing wildlife in their natural habitat. Refer to Chapters IV-5 and IV-11 for further guidelines and considerations.

Lighting need not be overhead alone. Significant benefits may be achieved by uplighting pedestrians at crosswalks and along roadsides.

Provide Amenities for Physical Comfort

As downtown develops into a distinct district, it needs to be able to accommodate the needs of its users. Amenities for the comfort of the downtown community can enhance the appeal of the environment.

Street furniture – Seating, lighting, trash-receptacles, public telephones, and water fountains are just a few features that can be included in the design of transportation facilities and public spaces. Providing these amenities might encourage people to relax and enjoy the experience of being downtown. These features should be set back from the roadway to reduce the potential for people to wander into traffic. They also require maintenance, and must be considered when the downtown maintenance program is being established. See Chapter _on Roadside Amenities for additional information.

Figure II-2.8 Street Furniture

(Source: Newport, WA)

Transit/pedestrian shelters – These need to be designed to accommodate passengers in the worst typical weather of the region. For example, in areas with frequent snow or rain, side coverings are desirable. While in hot or humid regions, large areas of roof that provide shade but allow the air to move freely are more suitable.

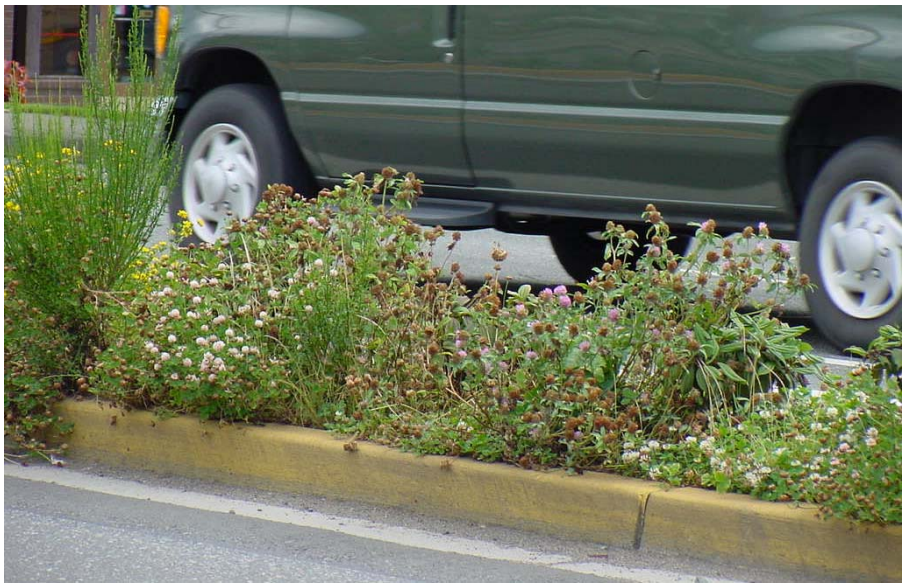
Maintain Quality of Environment Created

The novelty of a reconstructed and refurbished downtown might be an initial draw, but as the community continues to age, the downtown

atmosphere is to be maintained. Keeping the area clean, in good repair, and up to date is vital to establishing a downtown environment that will endure.

Establish a physical maintenance program – Without a maintenance program, the environment and features constructed can quickly begin to deteriorate. Maintaining the environment is vitally important to sustaining the "sense of place" created.

Figure II-2.9 – Maintenance Needs



(Source: SR 516, Covington, WA)

Ensure facilities meet defined needs – After the initial projects have been implemented, it is advisable to do a follow-up study to determine if the facilities are being used, and if they fill the intended needs.

Adapt facilities to meet changing needs – As a community develops, its needs and desires develop also. As one need for a facility fades, seek to use it to fill some new demand on the downtown environment.

II-2-3-4 Permanence

A sense of permanence in the downtown environment is conveyed by the incorporation of features that convey the community's ability to thrive. Some features useful in achieving this goal include the use of features specifically important to the community; structures that are built to endure; and enhancing the economic potential of the region.

Use Connections to Local Identity

Every community has some feature that makes it unique. Whether it is the ethnic community group that influenced their development, the river that runs through town, or the local industry, used the unique characteristic to help define and convey the history of a community. The members of the community can feel a special connection to their downtown as a result, taking pride in what it has to offer.

Figure II-2.10 – Local Identity

(Source:)

Ensure the Created Environment is Sustainable

With so many considerations and possibilities, a community might be tempted to develop an elaborate plan for a downtown area. However, if the features selected result in high maintenance needs, then the created environment might not be sustainable and quickly lose its appealing characteristics.

Develop a maintenance program – It is critically important during the planning process maintenance of any proposed features be considered. The maintenance costs required by the entire system are to be discussed, and the responsibility to cover those costs determined and agreed upon prior to the implementation of the project.

Figure II-2.11 – Maintenance

(Source: Kent, WA)

Use materials appropriate for the natural environment – Instead of trying to create a new look for the town, draw on the features natural to the area. This includes using plants that are indigenous or easily sustained in the environment, and using building materials that will not deteriorate quickly with the weather.

Develop Infrastructure with a High Quality of Design and Construction

Some of the benefits of using high quality materials at the outset are that they are durable and will be worth repairing when the time comes; high quality might encourage respect for the property; and visibly pleasing environments promote frequent usage.

II-2-4 Balancing Considerations

More and more communities are seeking to develop the unique qualities of their cities, and to establish a sense of community within their downtown areas. The specific guidelines and criteria the community defines through this development process can be used to balance future proposed projects with the goals and values of the community. As WSDOT, local agencies, and community members work together, the development of safe roadway and roadside structures must remain the primary goal. Balancing the needs for safety and the desires of the community can be accomplished through a conscious effort to include, negotiate and inform the wide range of stakeholders involved with the project. These efforts can result in facilities that meet the required functional needs of the route and support the downtown environment desired by the community.

II-2-5 Additional Resources

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Myerhoff, W. Arthur, *Community Design - A Team Approach to Dynamic Community Systems,* Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, CA, 1999.

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The Role of Transit in Creating Livable Metropolitan Communities, Transit Cooperative Research Program Report 22, Projects for Public Spaces, Inc., National Academy Press, New York, 1997.

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